

<b>Item No.</b> 14.	<b>Classification:</b> Open	<b>Date:</b> 12 September 2023	<b>Meeting Name:</b> Cabinet
<b>Report title:</b>		Response to Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Review: Housing Repairs Service, Council Leaseholders and Empty Homes	
<b>Ward(s) or groups affected:</b>		All	
<b>Cabinet Member:</b>		Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Homes, Communities and Finance	

## **FOREWORD – COUNCILLOR STEPHANIE CRYAN, CABINET MEMBER FOR HOMES, COMMUNITIES AND FINANCE**

The review of the Housing Scrutiny Commission into the Housing Repairs Service, Council Leaseholders and Empty Homes is very timely and I want to thank the Commission for their recommendations and the time they spent looking at these issues. At the time of our response to the recommendations we will be agreeing the council's Repairs Improvement Plan which clearly responds to the recommendations made by the Commission. We will also be taking forward the recommendations for action on empty homes and we have already put in place measures that meet the recommendations in respect of leaseholder service charges.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. That cabinet note the responses to 8 recommendations included in the report of the housing and community safety: housing repairs service, council leaseholders and empty homes.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

2. On 13 June 2023 the Commission presented its report to cabinet setting out 8 recommendations and requested that the cabinet member for council homes and homelessness report back to cabinet. This report provides a response to these 8 recommendations.

#### **Recommendation 1**

That the Cabinet set a clear target for the housing repairs contact centre to reduce multiple failures which lead to repeat calls by the end of the year 2023-2024 and collect data on causes and recurring themes.

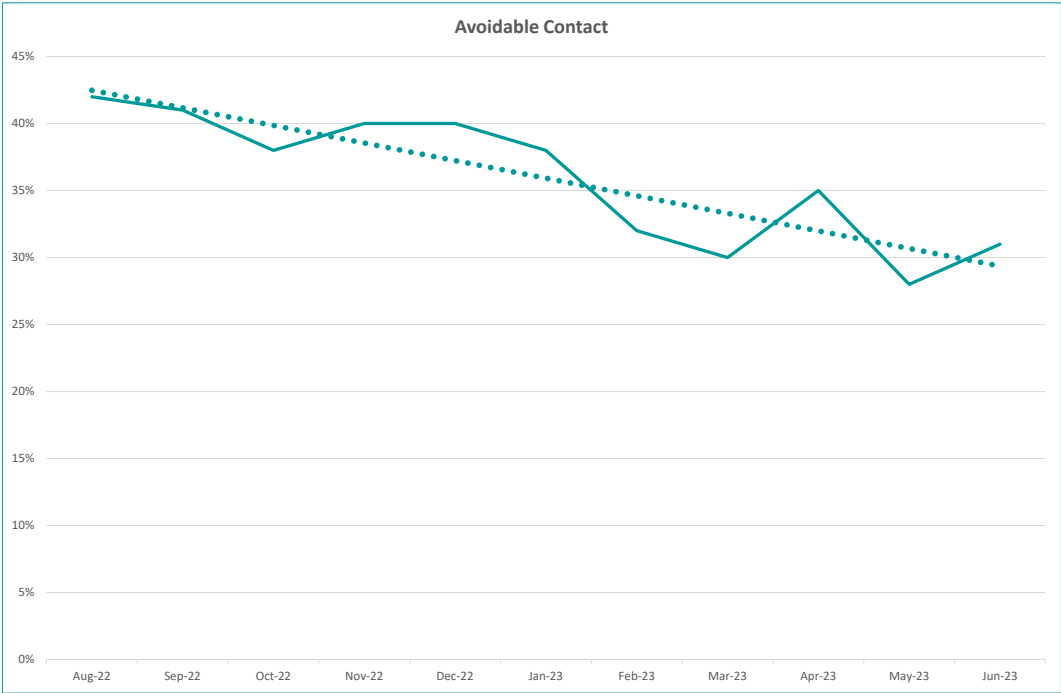
#### **Response to Recommendation 1**

3. The commission is right to be concerned about the high levels of calls to the contact centre that relate to existing repairs. This occurs when residents call repeatedly to chase or find out the status of their ongoing repair. Calls range from residents just wanting a simple update on a reported repair to missed appointments and repairs not completed. These calls are avoidable, and to date,

significant steps have been taken not only to identify the root causes but also to implement effective solutions to address these issues. It is anticipated the wider improvement plans the housing repairs service are implementing will help to reduce unnecessary contact.

- 4. However to prevent long waits or abandoned calls the contact centre has proactively worked to manage demand. Since March 2023, residents that call to chase their existing repairs no longer have to wait on the phone whilst the contact centre officers chase contractors for simple updates and information on the status of these repairs. A newly created team of officers (Tenants Liaison Service) now contact relevant contractors directly for updates. Tenant liaison officers contact the contractors directly to find out the status of the existing repair and call the residents back with real time updates. This means that residents do not now have to wait on the phones while contact centre officers try to find out the status of their repair.
- 5. In addition contact centre officers now leave digital messages about each call for contractors to directly follow up on existing repairs with the resident. Again, this eliminates the need for residents to wait on the phones. To date, approximately 98% of tenants with existing repairs have been contacted and provided with real time updates.
- 6. Whilst this joined up approach is already delivering noticeable improvements (see fig 1.0 – Avoidable Contact; % of all calls which are avoidable), it is recognised that long term and sustainable solutions are still required. We are continuing to work collaboratively with colleagues in the Repairs service to do this and help deliver an effective, efficient and consistent overall service to our residents and tenants.

Fig 1.0 – Avoidable Contact



### **Recommendation 2**

That the cabinet update the Repairs Improvement Plan to include a commitment to pro-active maintenance as a part of its new Asset Management Strategy and also that repairs improvement targets are reviewed quarterly.

### **Response to Recommendation 2**

7. As part of our broader Asset Management Strategy, when we carry out routine repairs or planned works, our operatives will report unrelated repairs to be remedied. Monthly inspections will be undertaken at all estates to proactively identify any required works. We have continued to expand our Repair Action Days across all housing areas, with dates communicated widely in advance.
8. Performance against our repair improvement targets will be reviewed monthly to ensure that improvement actions implemented are delivering the expected improvements.

### **Recommendation 3**

That the cabinet review the funding for resources in the repairs service to ensure the right levels of staffing and also endeavour to provide fit for purpose IT systems such as the integrated Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform to fulfil the aspirations in the new Asset Management Strategy and the Repairs Improvement Plan.

### **Response to Recommendation 3**

9. We, are in the process of reviewing resources across all service areas, and the approach to use of technology as part of the repairs improvement programme. The service will work closely with customer services to determine the most effective use of technology to provide real time information, ease of access for scheduling works and longer term online access for tenants.

### **Recommendation 4**

That the cabinet ensure there is clear and transparent communication with council leaseholders on decisions to undertake repair works, including value for money, and a clear process for council leaseholders to challenge estimations and requirements of major works through complaint and escalation procedures; and also ensure that this process is widely understood and publicised through all resident communication channels.

### **Response to Recommendation 4**

10. The process of communication is set out by The Putting Residents First commitment regarding consultation and communication. The formal legal process of consultation is by the Section 20 process where justification and challenge of scope and costs takes place Leaseholders are invited to make observations as part of the Section 20 process.

11. Residents can also lodge complaints directly or via their ward Cllrs or MP and finally with the First Tier Tribunal, which can also be through a mediation framework.

### **Recommendation 5**

That the cabinet commit to ensuring that all service charges statements and specifications of works will be written in plain English by the end of the year 2023-24, and that appropriate training of officers is in place to support this.

### **Response to Recommendation 5**

12. Home Ownership Services is committed to ensuring that all documents produced by the service continue to comply with Plain English standards. Officers that are employed in Home Ownership Services are assessed on their ability to communicate effectively.. Each officer is comprehensively trained before they begin carrying out consultation with homeowners and all communication, both statutory and not, will be reviewed before release until we are confident that the standards are met by each officer.
13. We have engaged with homeowner groups and working parties and reviewed our invoices, notices, notifications, statements and accompanying literature to improve our communications with homeowners and ensure that information sent out is clear and understandable.
14. There are certain unavoidable legal and contractual requirements where information is required to be included in a specific format and where this is the case we would look to explain further in accompanying literature. An example of this would be instances such as First Tier Tribunals setting directions directing the Council to release information in a prescribed manner.

### **Recommendation 6**

That the cabinet ensure that quarterly reviews and assessments of major repair works are carried out, especially with regards to competency, quality, value for money, timely completion and resident feedback, and make this information available to ward councillors and residents' associations.

### **Response to Recommendation 6**

15. The major works scrutiny board looks at the needs across Asset Management to ensure that not only asset renewal information is captured but that day to day repairs form part of the presented scope.
16. Also the client Quantity Surveyor as part of a new addition to the Major Works Delivery reviews costs for best value which takes place monthly on project reviews. Each quarter there is a Partnering Board where costs are reviewed across the borough with Partnering Contractors, Client and the Partnering Advisor. Competency, Quality, Value for Money, timely completion will be part of Resident Project Group agenda as a monthly review. These are available on request, as part of the Partnering Advisor role for the Term Contracts Quarterly

Reviews are undertaken and these documents can also be made available as part of any FOI request.

**Recommendation 7**

That the cabinet ensure that appropriate residents' organisations have the access to audit major repair works and that this is a key component of the repairs review processes.

**Response to Recommendation 7**

17. Resident Project Groups have access to view the scope, costs and Leaseholders upon request have access to view all documentation related to their bills. As part of Putting Residents First (PRF) Policy this information is readily available and can be readily available on request to any TRA or ward Cllrs.

**Recommendation 8**

That the cabinet include empty homes on the agendas for meetings held with housing associations with more than 1000 units from the start of the year 2023-24.

**Response to Recommendation 8**

18. We will ensure that empty homes are added to agendas for formal meetings with Housing Associations.

**Equalities (including socio-economic) impact statement**

19. This report is not considered to contain any proposals that would have a significant equalities impact.

**Health impact statement**

20. This report is not considered to contain any proposals that would have a significant health impact.

**Climate change implications**

21. This report is not considered to contain any proposals that would have a significant impact on climate change.

## BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Cabinet scrutiny commission report 13 June 2023	Online	<a href="mailto:Paula.thornton@southwark.gov.uk">Paula.thornton@southwark.gov.uk</a>
<b>Link (please copy and paste into browser):</b> <a href="#">Report Scrutiny Commission Review of Housing Repairs Services Council Leasholders and Empty homes.pdf (southwark.gov.uk)</a>		

## APPENDICES

No.	Title
None	

## AUDIT TRAIL

<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Councillor Stephanie Cryan Homes, Communities and Finance		
<b>Lead Officer</b>	Dave Hodgson, Director of Asset Management		
<b>Report Author</b>	Chris Wood, Interim Assistant Director of Repairs		
<b>Version</b>	Final		
<b>Dated</b>	1 September 2023		
<b>Key Decision?</b>	No		
<b>CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER</b>			
<b>Officer Title</b>	<b>Comments Sought</b>	<b>Comments included</b>	
Assistant Chief Executive, Governance & Assurance	Yes	No	
Strategic Director of Finance	Yes	No	
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Yes	Yes	
<b>Date report sent to Constitutional Team</b>	1 September 2023		